

# STYLE MANUALS MASTERS OR SERVANTS



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To paraphrase the theologian  
Alexander Campbell  
(1788-1866), a good motto  
for all writers might well be:

*In matters of fact, accuracy;  
in matters of style,  
consistency; in all things,  
clarity.*

## WHAT IS A STYLE MANUAL?

The label "style manual" can  
mean different things to  
different people, but the  
broad concept is that such a  
work should act as an  
authoritative reference tool  
for writers, editors,

publishers, indexers, printers, designers and web site creators in regard to grammar, spelling, punctuation and word usage.

Other aspects which might be covered could include style issues for which there is no "right" or "wrong", such as rules governing capitalisation, italics, acronyms, date formats and the use of British versus American spelling and gender neutral language. The treatment of quotations, spacing, sub-headings, tables, illustrations, footnotes, references, indices and so on could also be covered. A good manual would also include plenty of examples.

Of course, in some areas there is indeed a "right" or "wrong" approach - for example, metric symbols

should be written only in the way specified in an international standard.

A modern style manual also needs to take into consideration that in this age of computers and the Internet not all writing is intended for the printed page.

## DESCRIPTIVE VERSUS PRESCRIPTIVE?

Most dictionaries are *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. In other words, they summarise alternative current usages but refrain from making value judgements.

However, in order to be useful a style manual really needs to be prescriptive - otherwise one of its key objectives, the encouragement of

consistency, would be lost. Furthermore, merely counting heads does nothing to raise standards.

Of course, this does not mean that the users of a particular work cannot depart from its recommendations and substitute their own preferences at will. Rather it means that when they do this it should ideally be as the result of a conscious and reasoned decision on their part.

Inevitably, the authors of prescriptive guides tend to be both passionate and opinionated. Thus their considered views on some issues may well deliberately differ from those of other experts - thus leading not only to intellectual arguments between experts but also to

confusion for users. No style manual is meant to have the force of an Act of Parliament.

## OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

There is, of course, no official custodian of the English language corresponding to, say, the forty "immortals" comprising the French Academy, who are able to give rulings as to what is acceptable French. The test of what is and what is not good English must thus remain quite subjective.

A popular style manual in this country is the one formerly published by the Australian Government Publishing Service and now published by John Wiley and Sons Australia, Ltd. Originally produced by the Commonwealth Government for the guidance of its own

public servants it is now widely used by the private sector and by State Government entities. It, along with *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, can be regarded as de facto official authorities.

Some writers and editors regard such manuals merely as convenient guides to help the attainment of internal consistency in documents and as useful tools helping to raise standards in regard to the four key issues mentioned above - grammar, spelling, punctuation and word usage.

Such persons regard themselves as masters of the situation, able to make decisions in this area and to give expression to their own taste.

Other persons prefer to be

slaves, virtually regarding such works as holy writ or messages carved in stone tablets received from up high, to be followed to the letter - forgetting that at best a style manual does no more than reflect the considered personal views, preferences, tastes and biases of its authors and the extent or otherwise of their conservatism and pedantry.

## BUSINESSES

In the commercial world few companies other than book and journal publishers have a house style manual of their own. Most have never even thought about the subject and are not familiar with the concept.

A small number of organisations use the AGPS volume "as is". Some supplement it with a house

style guide, which can range in size from a single sheet to 50 or more pages. Such guides usually deal with aspects specific to the organisation concerned, such as the style to be used when quoting corporate names and logos or products with registered trade marks. Other aspects covered might relate to technical terms used in particular industries. There might also be a number of overriding rules based on the individual taste of the head of the enterprise concerned.

Business houses are not interested in producing great literature, but they do create communications intended to be read and understood by customers. Their style manuals thus need to cover topics such as layout and the use of jargon,



acronyms, political correctness and plain English drafting. Committee productions need rules aimed at achieving internal consistency.

Of course, a house style manual can also deal with certain associated legal issues which, while not really matters of style, may be of particular relevance to an organisation that publishes certain categories of written material. Thus, for example, a discussion of breach of copyright, defamation, contempt of court and contempt of Parliament might be included.

As part of the research for this paper e-mails were sent to a representative sample of 21 companies most but not all of which were listed on the Australian Stock Exchange.

They covered a range of sizes and industries, but the sample deliberately excluded companies involved with publishing books, magazines or newspapers.

The recipients were invited to send copies of any style manuals that were being used by their organisations and/or their related companies. The results were rather disappointing. Three companies explicitly stated that they did not use style manuals. The 18 others, by not replying at all, implicitly said the same thing.

The quality of many Australian business letters leaves a lot to be desired. Even publications produced in large numbers - where clearly a certain amount of effort would be justified on economic grounds - are often

very poorly written. For example, a few years ago a leading bank sent its millions of customers a letter containing the following sentence: "To remind you of another Tax, this time being introduced by the Federal Government, is the Federal Bank Account Debits Tax."

Clearly many management teams do not regard the use of good English in their organisations as important. Only on rare occasions do they arrange for their staffs to receive appropriate training, to counter the weaknesses in the education system.

## TAKEOVERS

Companies sometimes acquire subsidiaries in takeovers and then rationalise staff and facilities. However, unifying word styles would be well

down their list of priorities. The correct or elegant use of the English language would not be regarded as a profit centre.

Quite apart from inertia or ignorance, such companies might also want to retain as much of the separate cultures of their newly acquired subsidiaries as possible, so as not to needlessly upset employees or customers.

## OVERSEAS OWNED COMPANIES

Some overseas based companies operate in Australia through subsidiaries. The extent of control from head office would vary according to the circumstances, but usually the Australian offshoots would be allowed freedom to run their affairs to fit in

with local conditions - regulatory legislation, taxation, labour conditions, markets and so on are all going to be different in different countries. There is also the tyranny of distance.

A German parent would not expect its Australian subsidiaries to communicate with their own customers other than in the local language, and the same principle would also hold for US parents. The imposition of overseas style on local offshoots would make little sense.

As indicated above most companies operating in Australia do not even have a style manual of their own. Their overseas parents would in any case be more concerned with issues affecting group profitability,

such as the effective use of capital and the choice of markets and products.

Questions of style would be regarded as quite unimportant administrative details.

If a manual developed in Australia were regarded as suitable for use in, say, the United States then, having regard to the extreme parochialism prevalent in that country, the most likely approach would be to produce an American version for use in that country rather than to force US style onto Australian customers.

## PUBLISHERS

In contrast to other organisations, companies involved with publishing books, newspapers and magazines usually do have

quite elaborate style manuals and seek to enforce their use on their own writers and editors. These manuals are nowadays stored electronically on computers and made readily accessible on an intranet. Such a format also makes it easy to keep the guidance up-to-date.

However, such efforts are not always successful - possibly because a very large manual gets put into the mental "too hard" basket instead of being read and followed. Furthermore, too much detail supplied to outside authors can thus be counterproductive.

In newspapers and other multi-author publications consistency of style becomes important - particularly in regard to aspects such as hyphens and capitals, where

any rules tend to be arbitrary.

However, in the case of self-contained books by a single author strict adherence to a publisher's house style makes less sense, as long as the author has a logical style guide of his or her own and achieves internal consistency.

Typically, the instructions to authors are to the effect "this is how we do it", without any implied claim to be following some universal standard.

A worrying aspect arises where insistence on exact conformity to a journal's house style becomes a determinant when considering the publication of a submitted manuscript.

**INFORMAL APPROACHES**



There are also less formal style guides for certain common situations - although these are usually not given grandiose titles. To illustrate:

- Public relations organisations issue lists of words and phrases which are regarded as being particularly effective and desirable in public utterances, as well as lists of terms to be avoided because of their negative connotations.
- In the medical world doctors and nurses are given instructions that prescribe the form in which hospital medical notes are to be completed.
- Schools issue edicts on how students' reports are to be completed by their teachers

and setting out features such as the denigration of students which are to be avoided.

- Church authorities make suggestions to their clergy in regard to the form of words to be used (or not used) on certain issues when speaking from the pulpit or when writing for church publications.

- The news scripts of commercial television channels follow a special genre which has regard to the time constraints and the visual nature of the medium.

## SPECIALIST GUIDES

Although perhaps not widely known to professional linguists, some fairly elaborate published guides can also be found in certain

specialist situations.

Three very different examples will illustrate this point:

- In 1987 the (former) Law Reform Commission of Victoria produced an 80-page publication: *Plain English and the Law: Guidelines for Drafting in Plain English: A Manual for Legislative Drafters*. It discusses at length topics such as the importance of organisation in Acts of Parliament and aspects of legal vocabulary. However, many of the principles would also apply to commercial contracts, to reports and to formal submissions.

- The Melbourne PC User Group Inc. has published on its web site an 11-page *Style Guide for Authors and*

*Sub-editors: How to Prepare Submissions for Publication*, specifically for contributors to its own monthly journal *PC Update* - although no doubt this well thought-out summary would be equally helpful to other writers in this area. As one would expect, it sets out inter alia a detailed standard for rendering many common computer-related terms and symbols.

- Deakin University has produced a *Chemistry Style Manual* of over 200 pages to assist its students. It, too, is available online.

## UNITED STATES

Unlike Australia the United States does not have a single widely used style manual. Instead, the guidance is fragmented over works such

as the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the *Associated Press Stylebook*, the *Gregg Reference Manual* and *Words Into Type*.

For scientific and similar publications the *APA Publication Manual* produced by the American Psychological Association is favoured, while the *MLA Style Manual* produced by the Modern Language Association is often used for works involving the humanities.

As in Australia, there are also a number of specialist manuals, such as those designed for writers in the fields of science, medicine or the humanities.

To make matters worse, different editions of some of the four standard works

mentioned above appear to be in concurrent use. Thus users looking for authoritative "holy writ" guidance instead often encounter quasi-theological disputes!

Some persons who have been trained to use a particular manual are quite lost if they cannot find an answer to something bothering them. Because of such brainwashing they even become too frightened to use their discretion.

## A LACK OF LOGIC

Another problem is that some of the advice given in these works is quite idiotic, thus rather detracting from their credibility. Consider the following sentence:

*Authors seem to be avoiding*

*"must".*

Australian and British writers would render such a sentence as above, with the full stop logically following the closing quotation marks.

However, most American writers slavishly following their style manuals would instead write:

*Authors seem to be avoiding "must."*

Putting the full stop before the closing quotation marks in this type of sentence does not make sense, yet this formula is actually *prescribed* for full stops and commas - although strangely enough the reverse is prescribed for semi-colons and colons. Americans seem unconcerned at this curious inconsistency.

The Australian punctuation also works if more than one quoted term is involved - for example:

*Authors seem to be avoiding both "must" and "shall".*

Of course, there are contexts where quotation mark needs to follow the stop - for example:

*"Come here," she said.*

The illogical style discussed above is apparently taught in American schools. This reflects badly on the education system in the United States. American writers seem unconcerned because they are used to it - it is regarded as traditional in the good old USA.

The idiotic American punctuation mentioned above



is akin to the absurd American system of writing dates (namely, month-day-year instead of either day-month-year or year-month-day). To non-American this sort of thing makes the United States look an astonishingly backward country.

While a few adventurous Americans are now using logical full stops and commas, the linguistic fundamentalists persist in defending the indefensible.

American copy editors who still slavishly follow one or other of the American style manuals mentioned above should throw away their chains and disregard nonsensical rulings even if they appear in such works. They should wean away any

publishers who expect these to be followed. They should start punctuating in a way that is not only logical but also in universal use throughout the rest of the world.

## INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

Unfortunately, by now the possibility of having a single style manual usable in Australia, Britain and the United States must be regarded as a lost cause.

Naturally, this causes great difficulties for authors and publishers who wish to cater for these three important markets (as well as those in other English-speaking countries).

Foisting Australian spelling and expressions onto American customers would

greatly prejudice sales and even bookstore acceptance. Producing two separate editions would be an expensive solution, not feasible except for best-sellers. The most economic solution would probably be to produce only an American version - while this might annoy Australian readers it would be unlikely to stop their purchases of the work.

Generally speaking, none of the three versions of English can be regarded as "right" or "wrong" in any absolute sense - various versions are just *different* - although naturally there are some exceptions to this proposition, such as the one involving quotation marks which was discussed above.

## CONCLUSION

Questions of morality or legality simply do not come into any meaningful discussion of English language style issues; the so-called "rules" are merely a matter of taste and tradition, in much the same way as in the case of dress codes.

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